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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the impact on remedial reading instruction of recent Massachusetts legislation aimed at providing diagnostic/prescriptive services to identified special needs children in the public schools. Specifically, the study concerned available programs, certification and deployment of specialized personnel, delivery of prescribed services, and application to the state for reimbursement for services rendered. Of the questionnaires mailed to school superintendents in 351 communities in the state, 130 were completed and returned. The findings revealed that a large number of school systems had remedial reading programs that employed certified reading specialists and that reading specialists were characteristically used in the state-authorized diagnostic/prescriptive procedure by which children were provided with special education services. They also revealed, however, that there was considerable confusion about the eligibility of school systems to receive state reimbursement funds when certified reading specialists provided diagnostic/prescriptive services to learning disabled children. As a consequence of this confusion, school systems whose administrators thought they were not eligible for reimbursement for reading specialists' services tended not to use specialists in this role, using instead special education teachers who might not have had specific preparation for teaching reading. (FL)

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# THE IMPACT OF CHAPTER 766 ON UTILIZATION OF READING SPECIALISTS IN MASSACHUSETTS

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Introduction

In 1968, the Massachusetts legislature passed a law which mandated that public school systems provide specialized services to all children indentified as "learning disabled." Such children have been variously labeled through the years as neurologically impaired, minimally brain-damaged, perceptually handicapped, and so on. No simple etiology of disability has emerged to permit a clear-cut diagnosis in these cases.

The popular recognition of learning disabilities, now called learning disorders, and subsequent legislation aimed at ensuring special instruction for children so classified, resulted in a split in the field of remedial education. These children were not simply remedial readers, they were learning disabled readers albeit a firm diagnosis was extremely difficult to arrive at and implications for differentiated remedial instruction were, at best, vague and unsubstantiated. One study of children who had been classified by their school system as either learning disabled or reading disabled concluded that there were virtually no significant differences between the two groups, although both were significantly different from a "normal" developmental group of students.[1]

Who was to teach learning disabled children to read? The classroom teacher was unable to do so, and the Master's level reading specialist in Massachusetts was largely overlooked as a resource. Instead, the certification category of Instructor of the Perceptually Handicapped was created (1975) by requiring one course beyond regular

preparation for classroom teaching. Later (1976), the number of courses needed for certification in the renamed specialization of "Learning Disablilities" was increased to three. As the problems of diagnosis in this area became increasingly apparent, and more and more special interest groups mobilized to demand state-subsidized education for all children with learning problems, a new label, "special needs" children, was applied. The field of Special Education accordingly expanded from its original concern with intellectually deficient and emotionally disturbed children. Along with the new label came a reorganization of certification categories and preparation requirements. The current (1977) certification categories in Massachusetts are: Teacher of School Age Children of Mild Special Needs; Teacher of School Age Children with Moderate Special Needs; and Teacher of School Age Children with Severe Special Needs.

Massachusetts children once labeled "learning disabled" are now funneled principally into the mild or moderate special needs groups through the process of a Core evaluation mandated for diagnostic purposes under the Massachusetts law, Chapter 766. Children with reading problems who are not Core evaluated remain labeled "remedial readers," while others in low income neighborhoods may receive special instruction through federally funded E.S.E.A. Title I programs.

Numerous mild or moderate special needs children are reading disabled and receive remedial reading instruction. When a Core evaluation prescribes remedial reading instruction, a school system may apply to the state for reimbursement for these services. The questions of who delivers remedial reading instruction to children diagnosed as having

special needs, whether these teachers are certified in reading or are required to have any special preparation in reading at all, and the extent to which Massachusetts public school systems view such services as legally reimbursable, are central to the purpose of this study.

## Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to determine the impact on remedial reading of recent Massachusetts legislation aimed at providing diagnostic-prescriptive services to identified special needs children in the public schools. The study concerns available programs, certification and deployment of specialized personnel, delivery of prescribed services, and application to the state for reimbursement for services rendered. The authors hoped to determine the current status of preparation, and the future preparation needs of personnel employed to provide remedial reading services in the schools.

## Method

To obtain the necessary information, the authors designed a questionnaire and mailed it to the school superintendents in the 351 communities in Massachusetts. A cover letter requested that it be completed by an appropriate staff member in the school system. Of the 351 questionnaires sent out, 130 (37.0%) were completed and returned. These data were obtained during the spring of 1978.

Analysis of Data

Item 1. There were multiple responses to Item 1 because more than one person was responsible for the program. Of particular interest is that 51 systems (39.2% of respondents) identified the director of reading as a person responsible for the program. This shows a large number of systems employing a person in that capacity.

Item 2. A large number of systems state that they have remedial reading programs at each level: 93.7% at elementary level, 89.7% at junior high level, and 87.4% at senior high level.

Item 3. Where remedial reading programs exist, a large proportion of these school systems employ reading teachers who have state certification as reading specialists: 112 of 117 (95.7%) at elementary level, 98 of 102 (96.1%) at junior high school, and 84 of 90 (93.3%) at senior high school.[2]

Item 4. Of 129 systems that responded to Item 4, 112 (86.8%) use a reading specialist on the Core

evaluation team when reading difficulty is part of the child's academic problem. The Core evaluation process, by which children are assessed for special education services, is a major procedure authorized by the special education law (Chapter 766) and complementary regulations. It is apparent that in a large number of school systems reading specialists are participants in the Core evaluation process.

Item 5. Ninety-nine of the 130 systems (76.2%) employ the remedial reading specialist to provide special reading instruction that is prescribed by the Core evaluation. This instruction is also provided by teachers certified in one or more of the special educator categories (Item 5b to f); in all, 110 systems (84.6%) indicated that one or more special educators provide this service. This fact demonstrates that special educators should receive preparation in remedial reading instruction. Eighty-four systems use both remedial reading and special education teachers; 18 systems use remedial reading teachers and not special educators; 28 systems use special educators and not remedial reading specialists for reading instruction. Finally, it should be noted that 55 systems (42.3%) use Title I teachers to provide

prescribed reading instruction. Federal regulations[3] mandate that Title I funds may not be used to supplant state or local responsibilities. Hence the use of a Title I teacher to provide instruction prescribed by the Core evaluation is contrary to Title I regulations unless the Core evaluation establishes that special reading instruction is not required, and merely advises that a child already in a Title I program remain in that program. Unless systems interpreted Item 5 as including this form of "prescription," up to 42% of the sample were in violation of the current federal regulations.

Items 6 and 7. When asked whether the school system regularly applied to the state for reimbursement for services provided by the reading specialist as part of the Core evaluation-prescription process, 53 systems (40.8%) answered that they do so, 61 systems (46.9%) responded that they do not apply for reimbursement. Fifteen systems responded that the remedial reading specialist does not provide such services.

Of the 61 systems that do not apply for reimbursement, 48 stated that this is because the services are not considered eligible for reimbursement. Of these 48, two apparently provide remedial reading solely through

the Title I program, and one claimed to provide no remedial reading services, leaving 45 systems providing non-Title I remedial reading service that the respective systems consider ineligible for reimbursement under Chapter 766. It is this group of 45 and the group of 53 that apply for state reimbursement which are discussed in the next part of this paper.

The data that have been examined thus far demonstrate a basic confusion about the administration of Chapter 766 with regard to reimbursement for non-Title I remedial reading in that 40.8% of the responding systems regularly apply to the state for reimbursement and presumably receive it, whereas 34.6% provide non-Title I remedial reading service through the Core evaluation-prescription process but proceed on the assumption that they are not entitled to reimbursement for these services.

Opinion About Eligibility for Reimbursement and the Use of Reading Personnel. Item 6 asks if reimbursement is sought when the reading specialist provides service in the Core process. The item was worded so that 6a would be selected if the school system provides the reading specialist's service and applies for reimbursement, and 6b would be selected if the school system provides

this service and does not apply for reimbursement. A respondent that does not provide the reading specialist's service to the Core diagnosis-instruction process should select 6c. Such would be the case if a school system uses a reading specialist essentially for developmental reading programs.

A school system might have been discouraged from providing remedial reading if the administrators believed this service would be ineligible for reimbursement. This possibility could not be assessed with the questionnaire. Such a school system would be expected to select 6c. No follow up question was asked of these systems, 15 in number, that did select 6c, to learn if they believe these services ineligible for reimbursement. However, three of the 15 systems that selected 6c also responded voluntarily to Item 7. The three selected "Yes", such services are not considered eligible for reimbursement. In addition, one system that selected 6b and Yes to Item 7 reported providing no remedial reading service. These responses are consistent with the possibility that these systems were discouraged from providing remedial reading services.

Those systems who selected 6b (61 systems) were

asked to respond to Item 7. A "Yes" response to Item 7 (selected by 48 of the 61, 45 of which provide non-Title I remedial reading) links (1) the failure to apply for reimbursement for the remedial reading services that the school system provides with (2) the belief that such services are not eligible for reimbursement. Question 7 was asked in order to obtain an explicit statement of belief concerning eligibility for reimbursement from those systems that do not apply for reimbursement. Unfortunately, the questionnaire responses did not establish the reasons for not requesting reimbursement of the 11 systems that responded "No" to Item 7.

The authors then looked for evidence of association between opinion as to reimbursement eligibility and the specific uses of remedial reading specialists. The two groups of respondents that are compared are the 53 systems that applied for state reimbursement (Group I), and the 45 systems with non-Title I remedial reading programs that consider themselves ineligible for reimbursement (Group II).

Although both groups use the reading specialist in some fashion in the Core process, it is possible that a school system may restrict the use to only one of two

or more purposes. The data were examined to see if such a restriction of use occurred and if its occurrence was related to opinion concerning reimbursement eligibility. This was accomplished by establishing the relationship between group (I or II) and response to Item 4 and to Item 5a.

All 53 school systems in Group I stated, in response to Item 4, that a reading specialist serves on the Core evaluation team when reading is part of a child's academic problem. Of the 45 systems in Group II, 37 used the reading specialist on the Core evaluation team. The difference between the groups is significant. (The exact probability was calculated; $P < .0027$ as a two-tailed test.)

Of the 53 systems in Group I, 50 used the remedial reading specialist to provide Core-prescribed reading instruction (Item 5a). Of the 45 systems in Group II, 35 did so. The difference is significant. (Chi-square = 4.452, $P < .05$ at 1df.)[4]

Limitations of the Questionnaire Analysis

1. The questionnaire did not explicitly ask if remedial reading is non-Title I. Comments written on

the questionnaires, especially to Items 2 and 3, led the authors to judge that two of the 48 who responded Yes to Item 7 had Title I programs only. One of the 48 had no remedial reading program. Internal consistency among items and comments by each of the remaining 45 systems led the authors to conclude that these were non-Title I remedial reading programs. Nevertheless, any revised questionnaire should explicitly ask if remedial reading is non-Title I.

2. Respondents who chose 6c unfortunately were not asked to respond to Question 7. This would have helped to determine if systems are actively discouraged from offering services they consider non-reimbursable.

3. There were occasional inconsistencies among responses. For example, a total of 117 systems responded yes or no to Item 3a, which should equal the number that responded yes to Item 2a (119). Such inconsistencies can arise because of ambiguously worded items or because respondents did not take care to make responses consistent when two items were directed to the same facts.

4. The analysis examines the relation between belief in eligibility for reimbursement and provision of

services by the reading specialist under the Core process. However, Question 6 asked if reimbursement is applied for when service has been provided. Not only does this analysis ignore those systems that might avoid providing services they believe are non-reimbursable, but the analysis to see whether services listed in Items 4 and 5a are related to the expectation of reimbursement is very conservative. A system would seemingly have to indicate yes for Items 4 or 5a if it responds yes or no to Item 6, since both responses to Item 6 presuppose that some service by the reading specialist is provided and Items 4 and 5a in effect name these services. Hence the analysis can be accomplished only because systems may choose to use the reading specialist to provide diagnostic services or remedial services, but not both. The result is a very conservative estimate of the relationship between provision of services and belief in entitlement for reimbursement.

Discussion

The data analysis revealed some useful and potentially important findings. Responses to Item 4 suggested that a high percentage (86.8%) of the school systems do involve a reading specialist in the Core evaluation

process when reading difficulty is part of the child's academic problem. In fact, however, all schools should make use of a staff person qualified to conduct and interpret a complete reading diagnostic battery when the situation requires it. Responses to Item 5 indicated that special educators are used in a majority of Massachusetts school systems to provide some portion of remedial reading instruction. In spite of this practice, state certification requirements for the categories of Teacher of School Age Children with Mild and Moderate Special Needs demand no explicit specialized preparation in reading. An examination of the responses to Items 6 and 7 may help explain in part why a school system might deploy a special educator to perform tasks more appropriately handled by a reading specialist. Responses of school systems to these two items revealed considerable confusion about their eligibility to receive reimbursement funds from the state for services provided by the reading specialist. Accordingly, systems which thought they were not eligible for reimbursement were disinclined to use the reading specialist. Instead, they tended to use special education teachers who frequently were not prepared to teach reading, but whose services were considered reimbursable.

These findings have clear implications for

state action on two levels: the first concerns communication and funding; the second, the preparation and certification of specialists. The authors believe that the state should continue to reimburse Massachusetts school systems for the cost of diagnostic/prescriptive services for special needs children performed by any appropriate staff members. Additionally, it appears necessary that the state apprise school systems of their eligibility for reimbursement under Chapter 766. An effort should be made by the State Department of Education to communicate this information clearly so as to eliminate the confusion which presently exists.

Special educators, many of whom are currently teaching reading without any preparation for doing so, should receive training in this field. Conversely, reading specialists (and remedial reading teachers) should be appropriately educated to teach children with the variety of special needs that often coexist with reading problems.

There is at present no provision in Massachusetts state certification requirements for this type of preparation for special education or reading specialists. Yet almost all special needs children exhibit some type of reading disability, and most children with severe

reading disabilities evidence learning problems which could place them in a "special needs" category. Frequently the two specialists are working with the same population of children.

There are two changes which could be made to improve this situation. The first has to do with the way we label and classify children. It is possible that a false dichotomy is created when children are labeled "learning" as opposed to "reading" disabled or vice versa. Labeling, in itself, is a risky practice given the current imperfect state of our diagnostic ability. The International Reading Association some time ago cautioned educators against attempts to label children, warning that we risk losing the child in the label assigned him. In addition, whatever the label, the methodologies and materials used to help children overcome a reading disability must be selected on the basis of identified needs. Each child is an individual; there are no formulas to which the specialist can turn for guaranteed success. Instead, the process involves ongoing diagnosis, interpretation, instruction, evaluation, and readjustment of one or more of these aspects according to the child's response. It might uncomplicate

matters somewhat if less attention were focused on classifying children with serious reading problems and more was paid to their individual needs. Such an approach, of course, requires collapsing the categories of learning disabled (or disordered) and remedial into one. This, in turn, implies a modification in the preparation of specialists to teach these children.

One approach to training such specialists is simply to require certain special education courses for prospective reading teachers and certain reading courses for prospective special education teachers. Another, which we believe is preferable, is to develop a new certification category combining these two areas so as to produce a different type of specialist who is prepared to deal with reading and learning problems across a variety of special needs populations. Professionals in reading and special education would need to cooperate in a reassessment of the currently existing competencies in each field to determine precisely what knowledge and skills should be requisite for certification in this new category.

It is instructive to note that many of the responding school systems indicated the need for this kind of

change contending that their special educators did not know enough about reading, and their reading specialists did not have sufficient background in special education. Some systems either required or strongly encouraged their specialists to acquire dual certification. Given this attitude, it might be assumed that, should this new certification category be established, it would eventually supersede some of the present categories which exist in reading and special education. It certainly would produce specialists who are significantly better prepared to assist children who experience difficulty with learning in general and learning to read in particular.

## Footnotes

[1]Leslie Burg. "Reading Disability Factors: A Comparison of Learning Disabled, Remedial, and Developmental Readers." Paper presented at the New England Educational Research Organization Conference, May 1975.

[2]There are slight inconsistencies reported between the sum of Yes and No responses to an Item 3 level and the Yes responses at that level in Item 2. That is, 2a Yes = 119 but 3a Yes + No = 117; 2b Yes = 104, but 3b Yes + No = 102.

[3]These regulations are presented in U.S.C. 241e(a)(3)(B)(1976).

[4]The two groups were also compared as to their use of special education teachers (Item 5b to f) and Title I teachers (Item 5g). Of the 53 school systems in Group I, 45 used special education teachers to provide reading instruction. Of the 45 systems in Group II, 39 did so. The difference is not significant (chi-square = .0017).

The comparison of the two groups as to their use of Title I teachers was intended merely as a check on

the possibility that chance differences have appeared. Systems that have only Title I programs were already eliminated from the two groups; therefore, this analysis of the data does not suggest how all systems with Title I programs use Title I personnel. Of the 53 systems in Group I, 25 used Title I teachers to provide prescribed reading instruction. Of the 45 systems in Group II, 14 did so. The difference is not significant (chi-square = 1.992).

## Appendix

### Questionnaire Responses

Please respond to the following items as indicated:

1. Who is responsible for developmental and/or remedial reading programs within your school system? Check whichever apply.

   51 a. Director of Reading
   14 b. Curriculum Coordinator
   14 c. Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum
   40 d. Building Principal
   49 e. Other, please specify

   _____

2. Does your school system have a remedial reading program at any of these levels?

| | Yes | No | Not Applicable |
|---|---|---|---|
| a. elementary | 119 | 8 | 0 |
| b. junior high school | 104 | 12 | 8 |
| c. senior high school | 90 | 13 | 14 |

3. If your school system has a remedial reading program, do any of your reading teachers hold state certification as reading specialists?

| | Yes | No | Not Applicable |
|---|---|---|---|
| a. elementary | 112 | 5 | 4 |
| b. junior high school | 98 | 4 | 12 |
| c. senior high school | 84 | 6 | 15 |

4. Does a reading specialist serve on the Core evaluation team when reading difficulty is part of the child's academic problem?

a. Yes 112 b. No 17 No Response 1

b. If not, who performs this function?

_____

5. When the Core evaluation prescribes special reading instruction, who provides this instruction? Check all that apply.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 99 | a. Remedial Reading Specialist | Non-duplicated Total: 110 |
| 48 | b. Generic Special Teacher | |
| 48 | c. Teacher of children with mild special needs | |
| 76 | d. Teacher of children with moderate special needs | |
| 50 | e. Tutor of the perceptually handicapped | |
| 79 | f. Learning Disabilities Teacher | |
| 55 | g. Title I Teacher | |
| 2 | Other (not solicited) | |

6. Does your school system regularly apply to the state for reimbursement for diagnostic and remedial services provided by the remedial reading specialist as part of the Core evaluation-prescription?

| | |
|---|---|
| 53 | a. Yes (Group I) |
| 61 | b. No |
| 15 | c. These services not provided by the remedial reading specialist |
| 1 | No response |

7. If no, is this because such services are not considered eligible for such reimbursement?

48 Yes

| | |
|---|---|
| Non-Title I | 45 (Group II) |
| Title I only | 2 |
| No Remedial Reading | 1 |

11 No

2 Blank